

**“Ancient Insights with Current Value”**

**Jeremiah 8:18–9:1**

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I will never forget the first pastoral visit I made. The pastor I worked with told me I wouldn't know whether to pray for this man or step on his IV. I thought, “He couldn't be that bad,” but as I was walked down the hallway of the hospital, I heard a man cussing out his nurse. It was him, of course, and when I walked into the room and said, “Judge Worley?” he said, “Yea, who in the \_\_\_\_\_ wants to know?”

You understand now why I remember the visit, but underneath the grumpiness was a good man. Once I told him who I was, he welcomed me. His funeral was one of the first I performed, on the same day I performed one for a Mr. Early — Worley and Early on the same day, God does have a sense of humor. But the judge was quite a character.

He was a member of a men's Sunday School Class, like the old Everett-Miller Class here. And he was remembered there for the Sunday New Testament professor James Blevins taught a lesson in costume as the prophet Jeremiah. When Jim entered the room and started talking, Judge Worley turned to the man sitting next to him and said, “Who in the \_\_\_\_\_ does he think he is?” When the man replied, “Jeremiah,” the judge left the room, saying, “I'm getting the \_\_\_\_\_ out of here!”

There are a lot of \_\_\_\_\_s in this story, we might not use this vocabulary, but we could ask the question the judge asked of the real Jeremiah, “Who does he think he is?” The people who live in the prophet's time ask this question. They experience prosperity, they think they are living in righteous ways, and then Jeremiah comes along with his words of judgment, predicting God's wrath and their destruction at the hands of foreign enemies. Just who does he think he is?

He is a prophet but one of doom and gloom. In fact, they pretty much call him this. He says, “Terror is coming, terror all around,” so many times that, when they see him coming, they say, “Here comes *magor mis a viv...* old Terror-All-Around!”

One scholar calls him the emo prophet in reference to a genre of music that developed out of hardcore punk and was known for its lyrical style with an emotional and confessional tone (Jon Mathieu, *The Christian Century*, September 2025, p. 26). “Emo” is short for emotional. Today’s reading from Jeremiah fits this style.

Jeremiah says his joy is gone, grief is upon him, his heart is sick. God’s voice seems to be added to the prophet’s, saying, “Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?” Then, Jeremiah says, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” There was a resin or gum from a plant or tree in the region that had healing properties. Genesis 37:25 says that Ishmaelites travelling from Gilead to Egypt were carrying gum, balm, and resin.

But the question here is rhetorical. There is no balm in Gilead for this malady, there will be no healing. The prophet concludes by saying, “O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” “Under what rock did they find this guy?” the people wonder. Such hyperbole, such catastrophizing, such moaning and groaning!

And yet, Jeremiah is right on two levels — geopolitical and theological. In terms of world politics, the nation is a pawn on a chessboard dominated by other pieces. Egypt is the power to the south and west while Assyria and Babylon are the major players to the north and east. Just before our reading, the prophet talks about trouble brewing at Dan (8:14-17), but this is just the most recent threat. Neither Israel nor Judah is ever a major player on the world scene, but there are times when they are especially vulnerable. The northern kingdom has already fallen to the Assyrians. The southern kingdom will soon fall to the Babylonians, just as Jeremiah predicts. Terror is coming all around.

But Jeremiah is also right theologically. The nation understands itself as having a special relationship with Yahweh, God, and because of this relationship, God offers protection from harm. But when the people are unfaithful, Yahweh removes this protection and abandons the people to the consequences of their own decisions. This is God’s wrath, not a heavenly lightning bolt, just the removal of protection. Without this, the greater powers nearby conquer them.

What is their sin? Previously Jeremiah has talked about the hypocrisy of worshiping in the temple, saying, “This is the temple, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord,” and then oppressing the alien, the orphan, and the widow, practicing injustice in their daily lives (7:1-15). In our reading, he refers to bowing down to foreign idols, putting other things before God. Just after our reading, he laments the fact that they have betrayed God and “bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood and not for truth (9:2-3).”

As a result of all this, judgment is coming, unless they repent. Jeremiah may seem to be exaggerating, surely it is not this bad, but it is. It is a difficult message. No one wants to hear it. Jeremiah doesn’t even want to proclaim it, but it is the truth. If only the people could hear it...

So, what is the message for us? This may seem like a distant tale, and tragic at that – the people do not repent. They are conquered, they suffer, this is like watching “Titanic.” It is clearer than our Gospel reading in which Jesus seems to praise a dishonest manager. Scholars have no idea what to do with that! But the truth is the issues addressed by Jeremiah are not that distant, and a tragic tale can have value.

One thing this reading tells us is that there are messages we need to hear, whether we want to hear them or not. There is a yearning for upbeat messages in the church today. This was the case before COVID and the current political malaise, but the yearning is even stronger today. We have so much stress and hear so much bad news, we need encouraging words from our faith.

The yearning is valid but not to the exclusion of truth. As English minister Leslie Weatherhead once said, there is no final comfort in a lie. 2 Timothy (4:3-4) talks about people having itching ears, turning away from the truth and listening to what they want to hear.

One scholar says that in Jeremiah’s time, people are attracted to the snake oil of good news prophets. People want to hear what they want to hear, and there is always someone willing to cater to their desires. This remains the case to this day, but the term “good news prophet” is an oxymoron. God sends prophets not to give us a pat on the back but to tell us how to change. We might not like it, but we need to hear it.

Sometimes the prophetic word of challenge comes in our personal lives. We may be unsettled by it, but God desires something different not as an arbitrary test of obedience but as a means of living a better life.

The prophetic challenge might also come to our nation. Jeremiah speaks not just to individuals but to a nation, especially its leaders. What prophetic word might God speak to our nation now? Different people, all claiming to be people of faith, have different ideas about what is right and what is wrong with America, but scripture names some key concerns – how we treat the poor and vulnerable, whether we welcome the stranger in our land, whether we speak the truth in love, whether we love our neighbor and enemy. How are we faring with these endeavors?

Then, the prophetic word might come to the church. Most of us are comfortable challenging the sacred cows of *other* people and churches, we can see clearly what *they* need to change. When it comes to our own beliefs and practices, however, it is another matter. As the old song says, “Oh Lord, it’s hard to be humble, when you’re perfect in every way.” We wouldn’t claim to be perfect, but... Are there any substantive changes *we* need to make? Are we willing to make them?

The reading from Jeremiah tells us there are messages we need to hear, whether we want to hear them or not. It also tells us that some messages are true, whether the majority of people believe them or not. Reality is not subject to a vote — gravity will have its way whether the majority believe in it or not — nor is God’s will. Most people think Jeremiah is a half-baked cookie who needs to go back to the bakery. He’s just not right... But the truth is he is right, in every sense of the word. He may not be vindicated in his own time, but he is right.

It is an important insight. People have different perspectives on reality, different ways of discerning truth — religious, scientific, etc. — but not all perspectives are equal. My theology professor Frank Tupper used to say, “There may not be one right answer, but some answers are better than others.” Indeed, they are, in any realm, and the added challenge today is that there is so much misinformation and so many people creating narratives to persuade that it is difficult to agree upon what the truth is, and many people are swayed by absolute nonsense.

On the tenth anniversary of Hitler becoming chancellor of Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to a few friends addressing what he called stupidity. We may not like the term, though in last week's reading from Jeremiah 4, the prophet refers to his people as stupid. But whatever term we want to use, Bonhoeffer describes people who are not lacking in intelligence but have been swept up by ideology, by slogans and catch-phrases, and thus given up independent thought.

One cannot reason with such people, he says, because facts that contradict their prejudgment are not believed, they may even become critical, and when facts are irrefutable, they are pushed aside as inconsequential. There is no point in attempting to change their minds because they are not thinking for themselves. In the end, Bonhoeffer says, the future depends on whether those in power expect more from people's "stupidity" than from their inner independence and wisdom.

It is frighteningly familiar, just like Jeremiah's perspective, and the message is clear. The popularity of a perspective says nothing about its truthfulness or value. Only time will tell what is true, right, and of God.

But there is one other thing our story has to tell us. Sometimes the greatest love for one's country is expressed through criticism. Patriotism cannot be reduced to mindless consent. Our reading from 1 Timothy calls us to pray for our leaders, but exactly how does it ask us to pray, for what? "That we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity..." This is not a demand for blind affirmation. It's not even a prayer for the leaders as much as it is for their leadership, one which brings justice and peace. In any time, healthy love for anyone or anything, including one's nation, is honest, and thus sometimes critical.

Jeremiah loves his nation. It brings him no pleasure to deliver God's word of judgment. It torments him, it moves him to tears. He speaks for God but also loves these people. Yet love seeks the greatest good, and what his people need most is to see themselves as God does.

It is no different in our time. Far too many people have a narrow view of patriotism in which it is wrong to question leadership. Some leaders can't handle criticism and thus try to shut it down. Yet dissent has always been a strength of our nation. The First Amendment

guarantees our freedom to express different opinions and beliefs in speech, in the press, in religion, in protests. When we do so in civil ways, we are not being un-American. We are expressing love for our land, seeking the best for it, just like Jeremiah does for his land.

Who does he think he is? A prophet of doom and gloom, an emo prophet, a half-baked cookie out of step with reality? Perhaps all these things, but the message he proclaims comes from God, and though it is ancient, it still has value. There are things we don't want to hear that we need to hear; things that a majority of people might reject but still are true; things about ourselves, our church, and our nation. Are we willing to listen? Ancient Judah was not. Are we?